

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Development Plan is the principal instrument that is used to manage change of a physical nature in the landscape. This physical change can relate to the pressures and growth of our towns and villages; their renewal and regeneration; the protection of our heritage (natural and man-made); as well as the many and varied pressures on the rural landscape in the form of rural housing, tourism, industry, wind farms, quarrying, forestry, transport, telecommunications and other infrastructure.

This change needs to be set and managed within a wider context – the relationship of Donegal with its neighbouring Counties and its Regional, National and International context. The Development Plan sets out a vision for the overall development of the County over the coming years and how to achieve it. It identifies the direction in which we want to go and provides guidance on how to get there. Future planning applications within the County will be judged and assessed against the policies, objectives, technical standards and guidelines contained within the Development Plan.

1.1 LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

The Development Plan is drawn up in accordance with the Planning and Development Act, 2000-2004. The Development Plan, following its adoption will remain in force for a period of six years, and from a strategic point of view it needs to look beyond that to its future in 15 and 20 years time.

The Planning Act, imposes a number of statutory obligations on Planning Authorities in the preparation of their development plans, including for example:

- Setting out an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area;
- Identifying development objectives for the area in question, including for example, the zoning of land; the provision or facilitation of infrastructure; the conservation and protection of the environment;
- Processes for public consultation;
- Strict timetabling for the plan preparation process; and
- Procedures for the review and assessment by the Manager and the Elected Members along the way.

1.2 INTERPRETATION

In this Plan save where the context otherwise requires:-

“The Council” means Donegal County Council.

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“The County” means the administrative area of the Council for the purposes of the Planning Acts consisting of the entire County of Donegal excluding the Town Councils of Buncrana, Bundoran and Letterkenny.

1.3 DOCUMENT LAYOUT

The County Donegal Development Plan 2006-2012 is comprised of the following documentation:

1. The Core document to include an Introduction, Legislative, Context, National Cross-Border Regional and Local Content and the Spatial Strategy. This Section of the Development Plan also includes the important subject areas of Policy Development, Transport and Communications, Employment Generation and Development Strategies, Housing, Environmental Services and Protection, Natural Resource Development. The Built and Natural Heritage, Tourism, The Gaeltacht, Culture Sport and Recreation and an Environmental Appraisal. (Chapters 1-11 inclusive).
2. A number of Appendices to include:
 - Appendix A – Development Guidelines and Technical Standards
 - Appendix B – Childcare Strategy
 - Appendix C – Housing Strategy
 - Appendix D – Retail Strategy
 - Appendix E – Location, Siting and Design Guide – Rural and Urban
 - Appendix F – Town and Village Control Point Maps Booklet

The basic sequential format of background, goals, objectives, policies and proposals is applied generally throughout the core document.

1.4 POLICY CONTEXT - NATIONALLY, CROSS BORDER, REGIONALLY AND LOCALLY.

Since the preparation of the last Development Plan for the County there have been a number of important policy developments. In particular, the **Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region**, together with the **National Spatial Strategy**, have been formulated so as to guide Planning Authorities with a spatial framework for the preparation of County Development Plans and Local Area Plans. Investment in the County is also expected to be guided by these frameworks.

These and other important policy documents of a National, Regional and Local context are highlighted below.

1.5 NATIONAL AND CROSS-BORDER POLICY CONTEXT:

The National Development Plan 2000-2006 (NDP)

The NDP aims to deliver to 2006 and beyond, a programme of prioritised and structured investment in Ireland's physical, economic and social infrastructure in order to strengthen Ireland's competitiveness, sustain economic and employment growth, foster balanced regional development and promote social inclusion. Projects which have benefited from NDP funding include investment in public transport (the Rural Transport Initiative), rural development, non-national roads, waste water treatment facilities, agricultural programmes, childcare development and funding for coastal protection schemes and other infrastructural projects.

National Spatial Strategy 2002 (NSS)

The NSS is an overall spatial policy framework setting out a national framework for achieving more balanced regional development. Under Section 12(11) of the Act, in making Development Plans, planning authorities are required to consider the proper planning and sustainable development of its area to which the Development Plan relates and any relevant policies or objectives of the Government.

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The Spatial Strategy, outlined below, will set out a framework for the County in response to the provisions of the National Spatial Strategy.

National Policy Guidelines.

The Planning and Development Act, 2000 specifically requires Planning Authorities to have regard to ministerial guidelines from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. These guideline documents include:

- Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structures, Guidelines for Planning Authorities, 1996.
- Residential Density Guidelines, 1999.
- Childcare Facilities Guidelines, 2000.
- Retail Planning Guidelines, 2000, (as amended, 2005).
- Draft Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Landscape and Landscape Assessment, 2000.
- Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Architectural Heritage Protection for Places of Public Worship, 2003.
- Architectural Heritage Protection, Guidelines for Planning Authorities, 2004.
- Consultation Draft Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Control of Quarries and Ancillary Activities, 2004.
- Consultation Draft Guidelines on Strategic Environmental Assessment 2004.
- Implementing Regional Planning Guidelines, Best Practice Guidance, 2005.
- Sustainable Rural Housing, Guidelines for Planning Authorities, 2005.
- Wind Energy Development Guidelines for Planning Authorities (DoEHLG, 2006).

The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025 (RDSNI)

County Donegal has an extensive boundary with Northern Ireland. More than 90% of the land boundary is in contact with the North. It is therefore very important to recognise this fact in the strategic policy context of the Development Plan. The RDSNI has been prepared with a number of themes:

- The development of balanced and polycentric urban systems
- The need to develop new urban-rural relationships
- The promotion of integrated infrastructure
- The sensible and sensitive use of natural resources, and the built and cultural heritage.

These themes recognise the relevance of co-ordinating spatial planning in cross border areas. In particular, the RDSNI has an objective to develop the north-west centred on Derry City, and to strengthen the city as a hub for the entire North-West, including Donegal, with which Derry has many strong linkages. The RDSNI notes that areas of disadvantage exist on both sides of the border, highlighting the need to foster more economic growth across the entire North West. The strategy therefore encourages cross-border co-operation on a very broad basis. The strategic objectives for the North-West area include the following relevant points:

- To strengthen the role of Derry as the Regional city and transport hub of the North-West, offering key infrastructure and services in administration, education, health, energy, industry, commerce, shopping, cultural and tourism amenities.
- To encourage economic growth and industrial development to meet the employment needs of a fast growing population; and
- To enhance the city through continuing regeneration and the sensitive development of its exceptional riverside setting and unique walled core; and

establish a unique city tourism market based on its reputation as a historic city, in the network of European walled cities.

1.6 REGIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

Regional Strategy and Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region, 2004.

The Border Regional Authority (BRA) is one of eight regional authorities established as a statutory body in 1994, with a mandate to promote the coordination of Local Authority business at a regional level and advise on the allocation of funding in the regions. The BRA includes the counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth. Its functions include the preparation of the Regional Strategy and Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region and the review of Development Plans of the Local Authority plans in the region so as to ensure consistency with the Regional Strategy and with one another.

Under the Planning Act, Planning Authorities are obliged to have regard to, and comply with, regional planning guidelines currently in force for its area, when preparing their statutory Development Plans.

According to the DoEHLG's 'Implementing Regional Planning Guidelines – Best Practice Guidelines'(2005), it is through the Development Plan process that RPGs will be substantially implemented. The following section outlines the proposed Spatial Strategy for the County and it outlines the key provisions of the Regional Planning Guidelines for the Border Region.

The Western Development Commission

The Western Development Commission (WDC) was established in 1996 as a statutory agency, with its board members appointed at the discretion of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. It publishes policy documents on development matters such as infrastructure, employment, agric-food production, tourism, telecommunications, etc. which are relevant to Donegal County's planning and development. Its key functions include:

- Developing a strategy for economic and social development
- Collaborating with statutory and community based agencies and business organizations to create the necessary conditions for private investment
- Policy analysis and development
- Encouraging local, community and indigenous enterprise and job creation; and
- Promoting and managing the Western Investment Fund.

Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland

In 1997, the Government published a National Strategy for Sustainable Development. The strategy provides a framework for the achievement of sustainability at a local level. It calls on Planning Authorities to incorporate the principles of sustainability into their Development Plans and to ensure that planning policies support it's achievement. The declaration, issued at the 1992 Rio Summit, included for the first time a definition of sustainable development namely: 'Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. There is now a mandatory requirement under the Planning Acts 2000-2004, to the achievement of sustainability. Achieved by the following:

- Encourage efficiency in the use of energy, transport, and natural resources through the careful location of residential, commercial and industrial

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development, and by controls on the shape, structure and size of developments.

- Promoting the most effective use of already developed areas.
- Securing the protection and enhancement of the natural environment, including unique or outstanding features, landscapes and natural habitats.
- Accommodating new development needs in an environmentally sustainable and sensitive manner.

The strategy highlights the need for Planning Authorities to take a strategic view of settlement patterns, development requirements and infrastructure needs in their Development Plans to avoid excessive suburbanisation, which is considered to be inefficient in the use of land, energy and transport. It states that Government funding for infrastructural development will not be forthcoming in the event of excessive and unnecessary land zoning in Development Plans.

Attention is drawn to the need for integrated land use and transportation policies to help minimise the potential growth in private transport demand and to increase the use and efficiency of public transport rather than facilitate the private car.

The problems associated with urban sprawl are highlighted and higher residential densities are recommended, particularly in redeveloping brownfield sites, land in proximity to public transport nodes and access points in town centres.

With regard to rural area, the strategy calls for a greater recognition of the need to protect the quality and character of the countryside. It contends that the growing demand for housing from people working in the cities and towns is generally unsustainable and requires a presumption against urban generated one-off rural housing.

1.7 LOCAL POLICY CONTEXT

At present there are a number of other statutory Development Plans that relate to the County. These are focused on individual towns and include the following:

- The Buncrana Development Plan, 2002.
- The Letterkenny and Environs Development Plan, 2003-2009.
- The Bundoran Development Plan, 2004-2010.

The County Development Plan relates to the administrative area of Donegal County Council, but excludes the areas to which the above Development Plans relate. Following the adoption of this County Development Plan, these local Development Plans will be examined to ensure consistency with the parent County Plan and addressed by means of a statutory Variation, if and when required.

The Letterkenny and Environs Development Plan, 2003-2009 is seen as an important document that will provide the framework for its transformation into a Gateway City, as outlined in the NSS.

Two other documents of note at local level, for which the County Development Plan has regard for, include the Council's Corporate Plan, which sets out the financial plan for the County from an operational point of view, and secondly An Straitéis, an important socio-economic and cultural document prepared by the County Development Board, representing a number of sectoral interests within the County.

The relationship between the Development Plan and An Straitéis however needs to be clarified at the outset. An Straitéis provides the socio-economic context for the Development Plan. Both documents exist as parallel statements on the development of the County, but their remit is somewhat different. An Straitéis

concentrates on social, economic and cultural development, while the Development Plan focuses primarily on land use. Land use decisions must be informed by socio-economic considerations and the spatial dimension of An Stratéis reflects the land use policies and objectives of the Development Plan. **The Development Plan is the statutory statement on land use strategic matters.** In practice however, there is substantial interaction between both, as each will assist in setting a context for the other. They reflect and reinforce each other rather than compete or conflict in policy terms.

1.8 PROFILE OF COUNTY DONEGAL

Donegal is nationally recognised for the beauty of its landscape and its spectacular coastline. This recognition has even reached the international stage. The County also has a very rich and distinctive cultural heritage, not least reflected in its Gaeltacht and island communities. The County plays an important physical and cultural role in cross-border communications, however with a peripheral location and a decline in traditional industries and services, it is presented with many challenges as it looks to the future.

Located on the north western seaboard, Donegal comprises a land mass of 486,091 hectares (6.9% of the total land area of the state). Although located in a peripheral location in relation to the rest of the State, Donegal has an extensive boundary with Northern Ireland, notably Counties Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh.

The County is dominated by a mountainous granite spine running northeast to southwest comprising the mountain ranges of Derryveagh within which Glenveagh National Park is situated. To the southwest of these ranges there is a massive peninsula of hard quartzite mountains, known as the Blue Stacks, extending from Ballybofey west to Glencolumbkille on the west coast. The west coast provides a beautiful indented Coastline, that includes the dramatic sea cliffs of Slieve League, spectacular beaches, tidal sheltered bays, extensive peninsulas and sea loughs (such as Inishowen and Lough Swilly in the North East), in addition to numerous offshore islands, some of which are still inhabited.

To the east of the Derryveagh Mountain Range drift soil provides some of the best agricultural land in the County such as in the Finn Valley. The quality of the environment is reflected in the extensive EU designations of many areas as Natural Heritage Areas (NHA's) and Special Areas of Conservation and Protection (SAC's, SPA's).

Donegal contains the largest Gaeltacht in the Country stretching from parts of the north coast, from Fanad Head (at the head of Lough Swilly) southwest as far as Glencolumbkille on the west coast. The Gaeltacht with its unique cultural traditional and linguistic heritage occupies almost a third of the County with a population in 2002 of 23,728.

1.9 POPULATION

The population of the entire county following the 2002 census was 137,575 revealing an increase of 5.8% between 1996 and 2002, still well below the national average for the period at 8.1%). The Preliminary Report on the Census 2006 published by the Central Statistics Office in July 2006, indicates that Donegal now has a population of 146,956 a percentage change of +6.8% in the period 2002-2006. The population of the County had declined between 1926 and 1971, but increased steadily until 1986 where it has remained fairly stable since. Donegal is predominantly a rural County with only a few towns with a population in excess of 3,000 namely Letterkenny, Buncrana and Ballybofey/Stranorlar

(census 2002). Letterkenny is the largest town and its significance is marked by its designation as a Gateway in the National Spatial Strategy. Gateway cities are envisaged as nationally significant centres, whose location and scale support the achievement of the type of critical mass necessary to sustain strong levels of job growth in the regions. These Gateways would have the capacity to support a stronger urban-rural structure needed to further development in their respective regions.

Table 1: Population of Donegal compared with State 1986-2002

Year	Donegal	State
1986	129,664	3,540,643
1991	128,117	3,525,719
1996	129,994	3,626,087
2002	137,575	3,917,336

Table 2: Population by Electoral Area

Electoral Area	Population 2002
Stranorlar	14,599
Inishowen	31,736
Donegal	25,020
Glenties	23,894
Milford	15,119
Letterkenny	27,015

Source: CSO Census of Population 2002

1.10 KEY ISSUES

Some of the critical issues that are addressed in this Development Plan, include:

- **The need to address the decline of traditional industries such as textiles, clothing, agriculture and fishing, with an emphasis on rural diversification, eco-tourism and promoting indigenous start-up businesses.**
- **Tackling the high unemployment rate relative to the rest of the country and indeed relative to its neighbours in counties Sligo, Monaghan and Leitrim (15.5% in Donegal in 2002 compared to 8.8% nationally).**
- **Inability of the region to compete for employment on a national or international scale.**
- **Strategic and local links to strong urban centres in Northern Ireland.**
- **Infrastructural constraints/deficiencies throughout the County and in particular the absence of a strong east-west road link.**
- **Weak urban structure and the need to strengthen the role of the towns and villages which serve the expansive rural population.**
- **Tackling rural depopulation and maintaining the strong cultural identity of the Gaeltacht areas.**

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- **Strengthening the infrastructural links within the County and to regional centres outside the County, including Derry, Sligo, Omagh, Enniskillen, Belfast, Dundalk and Dublin.**
- **The need to seek the conservation and enhancement of Donegal's scenic landscape, natural development and heritage through the implementation of the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.**

The County Development Plan in so far as it deals with the Strategic Spatial Framework for the County, will play its part in pointing the way forward to improving and enhancing the economic health and welfare of the County and addressing these issues.